

WATER SECTOR WORKFORCE

ISSUE SUMMARY:

Every day, in communities across our nation, the dedicated workers who operate and maintain over 150,000 public drinking water and wastewater systems ensure that our water is clean and safe for hundreds of millions of Americans. These “water protection specialists” are critical to the safety and well-being of our communities and serve as the foundation for virtually all aspects of our society. EPA, along with our federal and industry partners, is committed to building a sustainable, resilient and diverse water workforce. This goal is reflected in America’s Water Sector Workforce Initiative¹, which EPA issued on October 5, 2020, along with actions and commitments from a range of stakeholders.

UPCOMING MILESTONES:

EPA is continually engaged with federal and industry partners to develop tools and share information related to building a sustainable, resilient, and diverse water workforce. Some of the key milestones include:

- **Biannually** – Beginning in 2021, EPA has committed to convene interested stakeholders from government, industry associations, and others to share information and ideas and plan future collaborations.
- **Annually** – Beginning in 2021, EPA will use the information generated during the biannual convenings to update the America’s Water Sector Workforce Initiative.
- **2020**—Issue a Compendium of Water Utility Workforce Case Studies, highlighting best practices and other innovations.
- **2021**—Host up to seven Water Workforce Webinars on a range of water workforce topics.
- **2020 and 2021** – Release the Request for Applications (RFA), evaluate applications, select grantees, and award funds for the inaugural Innovative Water Infrastructure Workforce Development Program grant (authorized by America’s Water Infrastructure Act of 2018).
- **2021** – Establish “Promoting a Veteran Workforce for the Water Sector” Memorandum of Understanding between EPA and the Department of Veteran’s Affairs (VA). Work to provide outreach to pre-separation military service members and connect with the Employment Coordinators at the VA Regional Offices to encourage participation by America’s Veterans in the water sector workforce.
- **2021** – Participate in Interagency Working Group for Youth Programs and develop a social media challenge for high school students about jobs in the water sectors.

BACKGROUND:

Cities and communities across the country are facing critical staffing shortages for the operation and maintenance of essential drinking water and wastewater infrastructure. Reports in 2018 from both the Government Accountability Office (GAO)² and the Brookings Institution³ showed that almost a quarter of the water workforce is aged 55 or older, with higher proportions of older workers in certain occupations, such as water operators and mechanics. The Brookings report also showed that only 10 percent of the water workforce is under 24 years old, indicating that we may expect shortages as the older generation reaches retirement age. Utility leaders across the country are echoing this concern. At the same time, challenges such as emerging-contaminants, aging infrastructure, water shortages, cybersecurity, and rapidly changing treatment technologies and processes are placing greater demands on our drinking water and wastewater utilities. As this water system environment evolves, a growing number of service providers will also need

¹ <https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-water-infrastructure/americas-water-sector-workforce-initiative>

² GAO, January 2018: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/690/689621.pdf>

³ Brookings Institution, June 2018: <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Brookings-Metro-Renewing-the-Water-Workforce-June-2018.pdf>

water protection specialists with the skillsets and training to deal with more complex issues like the use of innovative technologies, water reuse, and other emerging challenges.

The identification of challenges and implications, as well as the need for a collaborative response, led to the launch of America's Water Sector Workforce Initiative. The Initiative is organized around three interrelated action areas:

- Action Area 1: Provide federal leadership to create national momentum and coordinate efforts
- Action Area 2: Partner to build the water workforce of the future
- Action Area 3: Bolster education and outreach to make water a career of choice

EPA and our federal partners have made the commitment to work together through this Initiative to create national awareness and focused leadership that helps serve as a catalyst for developing a robust, highly skilled and sustainable water workforce. We also remain fully committed to continue to partner and collaborate with non-federal entities, including associations, states, tribes, local governments and utilities.

Key Federal Partners:

- The Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (ED-OCTAE)
- The Department of Labor, Employment & Training Administration (DOL-ETA)
- The Department of Labor, Women's Bureau (DOL-WB)
- USDA Rural Development, Rural Utilities Service (RUS)
- Veterans Affairs (VA) - Office of Transition and Economic Development (TED)
- VA - Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) Service (formerly Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service)

Key Industry and Association Partners:

- American Water Works Association (AWWA)
- Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies (AMWA)
- Association of State Drinking Water Administrators (ASDWA)
- National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA)
- National Rural Water Association (NRWA)
- Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP)
- Water Environment Federation (WEF)
- Water Reuse Association (WaterReuse)
- Water Research Foundation (WRF)

KEY EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS:

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Congress | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Industry | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> States | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tribes | <input type="checkbox"/> Media | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other Federal Agency |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NGO | <input type="checkbox"/> Local Governments | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other: <u>Water and wastewater utilities</u> | | | |

MOVING FORWARD:

Promoting the development of a trained, motivated, resilient and diverse water workforce will remain an EPA priority and an area of great public interest. EPA is continuing to take actions to help promote workforce development in the water sector as part of the October 2020 Executive Order (EO) on "Modernizing America's Water Resource Management and Water Infrastructure." This EO formally establishes a Water Subcabinet of senior Federal agency officials to facilitate efficient and effective management and modernization of our water supplies and systems while also eliminating duplication between agencies. As part of the EO, the Water Subcabinet will support and enhance workforce development to recruit, train, and retain water sector professionals. Bolstering the water workforce will also help to ensure the reliability of our water supplies, water quality, and water systems.

LEAD OFFICE/REGION: OFFICE OF WATER

OTHER KEY OFFICES/REGIONS: